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JEWISH GRAMMARIANS OF THE MIDDLE AGES.

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V.

DÔNÂSH BEN LABRAT.

It occasionally happens that a man attains fame not for any pronounced merits of his own, but because he chances to be thrown in contact with some eminent personage, either as a friend or as an opponent. Boswell is remembered solely because he followed Johnson about like a shadow. Lessing replies to the attacks made upon him by Goetze, and in this way ensures for the latter a lasting celebrity, though not of the most enviable kind. Dônâsh b. Labrat enjoys the distinction—if distinction it be—of being the opponent of Saadia Gaon and of Menahem b. Sarûk. Whether he had other claims for being remembered or not, he is known to us only as the author of two sharp polemical treatises; the one containing a pointed criticism of Saadia's Arabic translation of the Bible;¹ the other, an attempt to discountenance Menahem's standing as a grammarian, under the guise of a would-be friendly review of the latter's dictionary.

Concerning the life and career of Dônâsh we know nothing but that he was born in Fez, and was a contemporary of Menahem b. Sarûk. It would seem as though Dônâsh never completed the criticism of Saadia's translation, or—which is perhaps more probable—the single manuscript which exists of the work² contains only an abstract of the whole. Dônâsh picks out the flaws in the translation, shows that in many places Saadia misunderstood the sense, in others was misled by external resemblances to confuse stems together which had nothing to do with one another. There is no doubt that in many, if not in most, of the criticisms which Dônâsh makes, he is fully in the right. So in the very first paragraph of his "Replies" he points out that Saadia reads the word אִמְתָּה (Exod. II. 5) for אִמְתָּהּ, and renders "and she stretched out her fore-arm," though the Targum also adopts this interpretation.³ Again, misled perhaps by the following word, Saadia takes "כֹּהֲלִים נָטַע" (Num. XXIV. 6) in the sense "as tents, the Lord planted."⁴ Dônâsh shows the objections to such a rendering. In this

¹ See HEBRAICA, vol. III., No. 3.

² Published by Robert Schröter (Breslau, 1866), under the title ספר תשובות רונש הלוי בן לברט על רבי סעריה גאון.

³ In accordance with an opinion in Lotah, 12a, and Exodus Rabbah, s. 1.

⁴ v. B'rakhoth, 16a.

way he passes on from word to word through the 192 paragraphs comprising the part of the treatise that is known to us. Assuming that he is always justified in his objections, he is still not warranted in speaking with such severity and at times contempt of Saadia's work as characterize the *critique*. Allowance may of course be made for the customs of the time. Dônâsh lived in an age when a spade was called a spade, and when, in their warfare with one another, scholars vied with each other in the use of opprobrious epithets and slanderous insinuations—remnants of which period may still be found in our own days. But Dônâsh, it is fair to suppose, outstepped the bounds of what was even then considered legitimate criticism; and especially in his treatment of Menahem, he is generally bitter, and at times extremely coarse. The consequence is that, even when we are forced to admit the correctness of Dônâsh's censures, our sympathies are still with the nobler Menahem, whose unselfish labors were received in so unworthy a manner. The opposition on the part of Dônâsh did not cease with the publication of his T'sûbbôth,¹ but was extended to charges of a more serious character. Exactly of what nature these charges were, we do not know; but we do know that they cost Menahem his happiness and for a time his liberty. His house, for some reason or other, was ransacked and he himself thrown into prison. There are good reasons for believing that Dônâsh was implicated in these indignities offered to a man who seems to have been the embodiment of the quiet and unassuming scholar.

In the introduction to the *critique* Dônâsh, it is true, claims to hold Menahem in high esteem. He calls him "my brother," prays that God may shower blessings upon him, confesses the reluctance with which he undertakes his task. "I reprove thee," he says, "only in the hope that thou mayest love me still more;" and adds, "How much better, besides, is open reproof than concealed love." But these and other complimentary phrases are scarcely in keeping with the bitter words with which almost every paragraph closes. Dônâsh's purpose to throw ridicule on Menahem is only too clear. Now, Menahem is a "fool," then, a "deceiver," and again, an "ignoramus." He misguides the young; he does not know what he is talking about; he is lacking in the first rudiments of Hebrew,—in such terms does Dônâsh constantly speak of his rival. All this, however, must not blind us to the merits which the T'sûbbôth possesses. While Dônâsh cannot be said to have advanced the study of Hebrew grammar, still the testimony must be awarded him that he was successful in picking out the great defects in the theories and views of Menahem. Dônâsh has a keener sense for the niceties of grammar than Menahem; he enters deeper into the spirit of the language; and even where his reasoning is unsatisfactory, his instinct frequently leads him on the right path. He also seems to have had a far better acquaintance with some of the cognate Semitic languages, especially Arabic and Aramaic, than his con-

¹ Ed. by Filipowski (*Criticae Vocum Recensiones Donash ben Librat Levitae*), London, 1855.

temporaries in general; and this no doubt was of great advantage to him in opening his eyes to the lack of method in the theories of the Jewish grammarians of the day.

His criticism is twofold. He attacks the interpretations which Menaḥem gives of biblical passages and of the meanings he assigns to words, and on the other hand points out errors in tracing words to their stems, in throwing verbal forms together which have nothing in common, in mistaking nouns for verbs, suffixes for parts of the stem and the reverse; and more the like. He embodies his objections in the form of a poem—if a conglomeration of rhyming stanzas may be called a poem—which but for a kind of a commentary which he has fortunately attached, explaining at length on what grounds his differences are based, would be perfectly unintelligible. Even as it is, despite the prosaical supplement, there are many passages which are absolute enigmas, though for our consolation be it added, that we probably lose very little by our inability to fathom them. For the understanding of Dônâsh's position it suffices to confine ourselves to his prose, which, in contradistinction to his heavy verse, is graceful, fluent, and extremely pleasant to read.

As a specimen of his method, his reply to Menaḥem's argument against Jehuda Ibn Koreish's explanation of כֶּבֶשׂ אֵלֶיךָ (Jer. xi. 19) as "lamb and ox," may be selected. Menaḥem, it will be remembered,¹ asserts that the *waw* conjunctive can only be omitted in a continuous series of at least three words, and even then there is a *waw* just before the last of the words thus placed in juxtaposition. Furthermore, the singular of the verb (יִכְבֵּשׁ) which follows shows that the subject also must be a singular. Dônâsh disputes both assertions, and justly so. Examples such as שְׂמֵשׁ יָרַח עֶמֶד וְזוּלָה (Hab. iii. 11) prove that the *waw* may be omitted in the case of two words; and in the second place, there are many instances where a singular verb is attached to a plural subject, or has for its subject two nouns; e. g., שֶׁמֶן וְקִטְרֵת יִשְׁמַח לָב (Prov. xxvii. 9), רוּחַ וְהִצֵּלָה, יַעֲמֹד (Esth. iv. 14). Dônâsh accepts, accordingly, the interpretation given by Koreish. In his opinion there is an intentional contrast between the small and great. The prophet wishes to say that both lamb as well as ox shall be carried to the slaughter. The *arguments* of Dônâsh are sound enough to set aside Menaḥem's objections; but, for all that, Menaḥem is right and Koreish wrong. The context clearly demands such a translation as "I am like a tame lamb led to the slaughter."

In general, Dônâsh may be said to be a closer or rather a sharper reasoner than Menaḥem. He pays greater attention to minute details, and there is little that escapes his critical eye. Menaḥem rather carelessly mistakes the word צֶלֶם in יִתְהַלֵּךְ אִישׁ בְּצֶלֶם (ψ 39, 7) for "image," for which Dônâsh takes him severely to task. He shows that the stem is the same as that of צִלְמוֹת, and

¹ See HEBRAICA, vol. iv., p. 32.

hence the phrase is to be rendered "in darkness man wanders about." It is important to note that Dônâsh is not led astray by the Massoretic vocalization of **צִלְמוֹת** to explain it (as has so often been done) as a combination of two words. For him the word is an abstract noun, formed just as **קִדְרוֹת** (Isa. L. 3), and he also attempts to give a reason for the curious vocalization, in which, however, he is less successful. The fact is that the Massoretes believed the word to be composed of **צִל** and **מוֹת**, and vocalized it accordingly. But rejecting the "punning" etymology, we are justified in setting aside the traditional vocalization, and read instead "šalmût."

Menaḥem again exhibits a neglect of detail in throwing **בֵּית אֲרֵבָאֵל** (Hos. x. 14) under the same category as **אֲרֵב** "to ensnare," and also similarly deriving **יִזְרְעָאֵל** (Hos. II. 24) from **יִזְרַע**, regarding the two final letters as added, though without any apparent reason and without affecting the sense in any way. To Dônâsh, such a notion seems preposterous. Both words, he says, can of course only be nothing else than proper names. He pounces unmercifully on this unfortunate error of Menaḥem's. "I should like to know," he says, "how you propose to translate **יִזְרְעָאֵל עַל בֵּית יְהוּא** (Hos. I. 4), if **יִזְרְעָאֵל** is a common (and not a proper) noun? Perhaps, 'I shall visit the *sowers* of the ground in the house of Jehu?'"

In this way Dônâsh proceeds to expose the weaknesses and defects of Menaḥem; but while, as already intimated, he succeeds in doing this—and in so far, his critique is of considerable value to us—he cannot be said to stand on a higher plane than the unhappy Menaḥem. Like so many critics, he fails to improve upon the production he endeavors to overthrow. So while rejecting most of the attempts on the part of Menaḥem to trace verbal forms to uniliteral stems, he yet admits the existence of such stems. The stem of **נָךְ** is not a mere **ך**, as Menaḥem thinks; but this, he says, is the case with **וַיֵּךְ אֶבֶן בִּי** (Lam. III. 53). Again **כֹּה** "thus" belongs to the class of indeclinable particles like **פֹּה**, **בִּי**, **יֵעַן**, **נָא**, **רַק**, and the like. The stem is not a **ך**, but consists of two letters; however, **הַכִּי** (Exod. XVII. 6) and **וַיֵּךְ** (Judges xv. 8) do go back to such a uniliteral stem. The main difference between him and Menaḥem is that, while the latter consistently carries out his principle that no letter which at any time may disappear from the word can belong to the stem, Dônâsh sets up no theory whatever, but is, in great part, led by his instinct to reject the etymologies of Menaḥem. On the other hand, Dônâsh is unquestionably superior as an exegetical critic. Here he is generally extremely happy and ingenious. His interpretation of verse 13 of the very difficult Psalm LV. merits quoting. According to Dônâsh, the poet says, speaking of his distress, that, were it simply an enemy against whom he were obliged to contend, he might bear his fate quietly. He could seek refuge from one who hates him, *but* it is "thou a man of my rank, an associate, an intimate friend." Dônâsh adds, "It is a well-known fact that it is much harder to bear the

reproaches of a friend than those of an enemy, and one can escape an enemy, but it is impossible to avoid a friend, to whom one has poured out one's whole heart."

Again, as already intimated, the use he makes of his thorough acquaintance with Arabic, gives him an advantage over Menahem. He frequently compares Hebrew words with their Arabic equivalents. In one instance he enumerates about 260 words common to Hebrew and Arabic, and defends himself against the objection that was no doubt raised against this comparative method, by pointing out the closeness of the relation existing between the two languages. He also has at least an inkling of a *Lautverschiebungsgesetz*; for he says that there is an interchange of letters among the words as they pass from one language to the other. An ע in one becomes frequently a ג in the other; a ס here is a ש there; a ש in Hebrew is represented by a ט in Arabic; a ז, by a ד; a ח, by a כ. We also find in his grammar for the first time a systematic division of the parts of speech into nouns, verbs and particles; or, as he calls them, שמות ופועלים ותיבות הענינים. We may be permitted to conclude from this that Dônâsh made a study of Arabic grammarians; for the terms used by Dônâsh represent the Hebrew equivalents of those used by Sibawaihi in his grammar,¹ اسم وفعل . وحرف .

In this way, by directing attention to the Arabic as a help towards a better understanding of Hebrew, he paves the way for Abu Zakarijjâ Jahjâ ben Dawûd Hajjûg, who, by a more systematic and more extended application of Dônâsh's comparative method, inaugurates a new era in the study of Hebrew grammar.

¹ *Kitab Sibawaihi*, ed. by Hartwig Derenbourg (Paris, 1881), vol. I., p. 1.